

**By Kelly O'Connor**  
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Although it's taking her a bit longer than most students, Cristina Franco is dedicated to finishing high school.

She said her mentor, the late Barbara Sandborg, gave her inspiration.

The two were part of the Ophelia Project, a volunteer mentoring program offered through the John F. Kennedy Memorial Foundation. Bringing professional women and girls together, the program steers teens away from at-risk environments by showing them options and lending an ear.

Sandborg, a former editor of the Coachella Valley News and Palm Springs resident, was 79 when she died two months ago. Franco is an 18-year-old Indio student trying to find her path. The two talked nearly every day for the past five years.

"We talked about everything -- family, friends, guys and school," Franco said.

Before she met Sandborg and the other women of Ophelia, Franco had low self esteem. Since joining the group, she has surprised herself with her capabilities.

In front of nearly 100 people, Franco spoke at Sandborg's memorial service. "I told them that she was a second mom to me," Franco said. "Whenever I needed her she was there."

Another mentor, Pamela Simms, 54, said the women of Ophelia were moved by Franco's words at Sandborg's memorial.

"She got up there and spoke like a professional," said Simms, a Rancho Mirage resident.

Although Franco is feeling the loss of her mentor, she is completing her senior year at Amistad Continuation High School in Indio and said she should be eligible to graduate in February or March.

"I am dealing and trying to go on, because she really wanted me to turn my life around and graduate," Franco said.

She plans to enroll in communications classes at College of the Desert. "I really want to be a lawyer. I like to argue and I really like to talk," Franco said.

In the program since the eighth grade, Franco joined Ophelia to go on field trips. In 2003 the group visited the McCallum Theatre, Palm Springs Desert Museum and John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital and met for monthly rap sessions.

"It turned out to be so much more," Franco said.

The 35 high school girls in the program talk about their future with the women. Guest speakers present career options. Recently a banker spoke about managing money.

Simms, coordinator for the middle-school girls in the program, works closely with Franco's younger sister Divina.

The 13-year-old grew up wanting to be part of the group that her sister was so fond of. "It changed my life, now I have someone to talk to," Divina said.

Ophelia is available at Indio middle and high schools. This year 20 eighth graders have joined the program. All were selected by their school counselors.

Monica Alvarez, 14, was warned that she would not be able to be part of the group if she couldn't keep her grades up. That gave her the motivation to bring her grades from F's to mostly A's and B's.

"I was failing six classes, now I only have one D," Monica said.

She attends Indio Middle School and lives in the city with her mother, her 18-year-old sister and 12-year-old brother. Monica looks forward to Ophelia's monthly meetings, when she can talk to someone about her family relationships and "boys and girls stuff."

Also part of the middle school group is Ruth Morales, 13. She said she's gained a lot of confidence and feels better knowing she has someone to talk to.

"I know that if I say something, it stays in the group," Morales said.

Simms said when the girls open up she knows they've made a beneficial connection.

"Being with these wonderful girls lifts me up," she said. "I get as much out of the program as they do. I think that's really what mentoring is all about."

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